

Language attitudes condition gender-based asymmetries in child-directed speech: exploring morphological variation in Bangla

Background. Bangladeshi Bangla is characterised by diglossic differentiation of two main codes (Klaiman 1990). *Shadhu Bhasha* (SBh) refers to the overtly prestigious literary variety, whereas *Cholito Bhasha* (CBh, ‘current language’) is a supra-regional colloquial standard. This study focuses on morphological variation: e.g. SBh [kɔrɔ] vs CBh [kɔrteso] (do.2SG.PRES.INDIC.INFOR). Although existing language descriptions acknowledge broad attitudinal trends towards SBh and CBh (Dasgupta 2003), research on the variable use of the two codes, and specific attitudes towards them, has not previously been undertaken.

Methods. Our study is guided by the impressionistic observation that SBh occurs with higher than expected frequency in parental speech directed at girls. We first set out to confirm whether this intuition could be corroborated through analysis of child-directed speech (CDS). Secondly, we aimed to probe language attitudinal factors that underlie Bangladeshi parents’ choice to use SBh or CBh with their children.

Responding to these goals, we first analysed patterns of morphological variation in a series of YouTube vlogs created by five Bangladeshi families. Vlog data was chosen due to the lack of Bangla CDS corpora. We analysed 1001 verb forms from parent-to-child and parent-to-parent interactions. Secondly, using a combination of focus groups and online questionnaires, we surveyed 102 Bangla speakers (54 females, 48 males) about their attitudes towards SBh and CBh. We queried respondents’ personal experiences and reactions to the selective use of the two registers in CDS. Statistical analysis of quantitative data was performed using mixed effects regression in R. This was paired with analysis of qualitative comments from focus-group and questionnaire responses.

Results. Proportions of use of SBh and CBh in the vlog material are plotted in Figure 1. We observe approximately a 50:50 baseline split between SBh and CBh verb forms in parent-to-parent speech. SBh forms occur with slightly greater frequency in parental speech directed at sons, although this increase is non-significant. However, CBh forms occur with significantly less frequency in speech directed at daughters (father-daughter: $\beta = 1.174$, $p < .01$; mother-daughter: $\beta = 1.987$, $p < .001$). Additionally, we note an effect ($\beta = -2.1473$, $p < .001$) of *pragmatic frame* whereby social/relational conversational context induces significantly more CBh than instrumental/transactional exchanges (cf. Brumark 2006; Van De Mieroop et al. 2016).

Figure 2 shows predicted ratings for SBh and CBh along a series of relevant social attributes. Interestingly, ratings for traits like femininity and masculinity do not differ between the registers. Clear differences nevertheless occur for attributes like formality, educatedness, perceived social class and urban vs rural speech. Minor differences are observed for e.g. trendiness.

Discussion. We argue that differences in social perceptions of SBh and CBh directly bear upon the observed variation in CDS. They also underlie themes which emerge strongly in the qualitative data. We discuss selective parental style shifting to SBh in the context of concerns for girls’ educational achievement, social advancement, favourable marriage matches as well as culturally embedded notions of female fragility.

References

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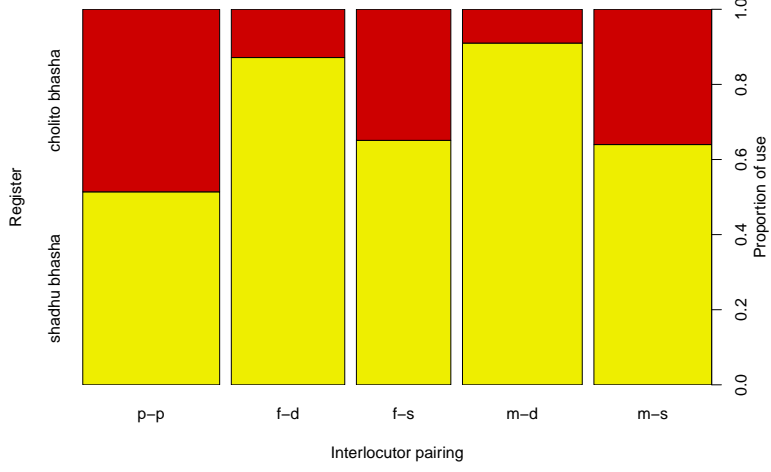


Figure 1: Proportions of use of Cholito Bhasha and Shadhu Bhasha verb forms by interlocutor pairing: p-p (parent to parent), f-d (father to daughter), f-s (father to son), m-d (mother to daughter), m-s (mother to son).

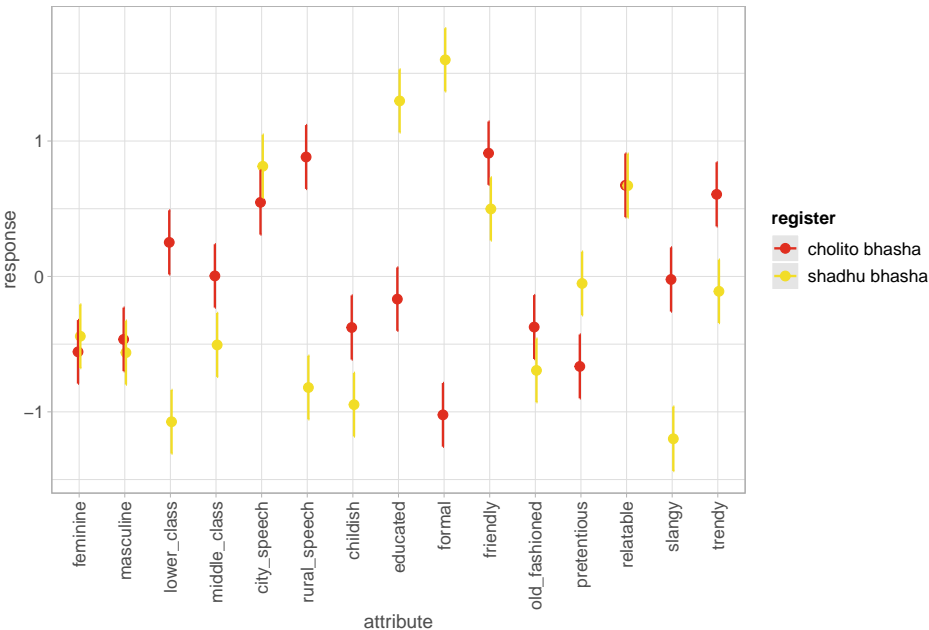


Figure 2: Fitted values from attitudinal ratings regression model. y-values indicate predicted degree of agreement: numerical scaling between -2 (“strongly disagree”) and 2 (“strongly agree”).